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Letter dated 18 July 2018 from the Chair of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations addressed to the President of the Economic and Social Council

With reference to the consultations that the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations recently held with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council mandated by the Council in its resolution 1996/31, I wish to note that this is the first time that they were organized by the Committee.

In an effort to promote greater transparency and openness in the work of the Committee, a two-pronged approach was followed. First, written inputs on questions defined by the Committee were gathered from all organizations in consultative status. Second, an interactive hearing was organized at Headquarters in New York on 22 June 2018. With a view to ensuring maximum participation, NGOs were able to contribute in person, by videoconference from Geneva and Mexico, by sending video statements or in writing. In total, 55 organizations addressed the Committee, 200 representatives attended the hearing and 195 written submissions were received. The NGOs that participated represented a wide range of fields of work: the areas most represented were poverty alleviation and social development; gender; human rights; education; health; and youth.

The key elements of the discussions and main recommendations made by organizations during that process are presented in the annex to the present letter. A compilation of the written inputs is attached as an annex to the report available at http://csonet.org/index.php?menu=80. In accordance with paragraph 61 (a) of resolution 1996/31, the present report is to be transmitted to the Council for appropriate action.

I trust that this exercise will contribute to enhancing the relationship between NGOs in consultative status and the United Nations. The bodies of the Economic and Social Council system, including the Committee, and those of the United Nations system as a whole, will need to make further efforts to translate some of the recommendations into practice. Holding future consultations will therefore be essential in order to review and continue to assess progress made in this evolving partnership.

18-12618 (E) 080818

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I should be grateful if the present letter and its annex were to be circulated as a document of the Economic and Social Council.

(*Signed*) Jorge **Dotta**
Chair
Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations

Annex

Report on the consultations of the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations with non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

Overview

1. The Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations held its first consultations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council on 22 June 2018. The consultations were held in fulfilment of the mandate set out in paragraph 61 (a) of Council resolution 1996/31, which stipulates the following:

> The Committee shall be responsible for regular monitoring of the evolving relationship between non-governmental organizations and the United Nations. With a view to fulfilling this responsibility, the Committee shall hold, before each of its sessions and at other times as necessary, consultations with organizations in consultative status to discuss questions of interest to the Committee or to the organizations relating to the relationship between the non-governmental organizations and the United Nations.

2. The consultations consisted of an interactive hearing and a collection of written submissions from NGOs on the following four questions:

(a) How can NGOs further contribute to the work of the Council and its subsidiary bodies? What are the most efficient modalities for NGOs to contribute to United Nations policymaking in order to be recognized and to be influential in such processes?

(b) In your organization's view, what should be done to provide better support to NGOs during the process of obtaining consultative status with the Council?

(c) How can the participation of NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition in the work of the United Nations be increased?

(d) Once consultative status is granted to organizations, what are the best ways for NGOs to access the opportunities given to them to take part in United Nations processes?

3. The Committee received a total of 195 written responses to the above-mentioned questions from organizations in all regions and varied fields of work. It received submissions from 56 organizations from the Asia-Pacific region, 18 from Latin America, 8 from Eastern Europe, 37 from Africa and 76 from the Group of Western European and other States. A thematic summary prepared by the Secretariat has been submitted to the Committee.

4. The interactive hearing for NGOs was held on 22 June 2018 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in the Economic and Social Council Chamber at Headquarters in New York, with approximately 120 representatives of NGO in attendance and 80 participating remotely from the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Information Centre in Mexico City. A total of 55 speakers addressed the Committee from New York, Geneva and Mexico, and two organizations sent video messages from Asia. Among the registered organizations, 40 were based in the Asia-Pacific region, 31 in Latin America, 3 in Eastern Europe, 60 in Africa and 154 in Western European and other States.

5. The NGOs that participated covered a wide range of issues. The areas of work most represented were poverty alleviation and social development, gender, human rights, education, health and youth. Other areas of work included family and children issues, environmental protection, peace, economic development, community development and international cooperation, among others.

6. The views expressed by organizations during the consultations are summarized below, under the four questions defined by the Committee.

7. Question 1: How can NGOs further contribute to the work of the Council and its subsidiary bodies? What are the most efficient modalities for NGOs to contribute to United Nations policymaking, to be recognized and to be influential in such processes?

(a) During the consultations, NGOs stressed the critical role that they could play in the implementation of major United Nations priorities, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as partners of the United Nations system and of Member States. They underlined the various ways in which they contributed to the work of the Council and its subsidiary bodies;

(b) NGOs indicated that they provided a voice for different stakeholders that would not be heard otherwise, served as a direct link to far-reaching communities and provided first-hand information on activities in rural and secluded areas that governmental agencies did not always have access to. NGOs referred to themselves as a pool of experts that could provide data, analysis and best practices from the ground. From their direct experience and knowledge, NGOs reasserted their capacity to provide valuable inputs in decision-making processes;

(c) Organizations highlighted their contribution to the dissemination and awareness-raising of the work of the Council through education and advocacy campaigns and emphasized their contribution to the progress made in advancing the objectives of the United Nations. They also highlighted their role in implementing major agreements and their role as partners in advancing the agenda of the Council, including by conducting needs assessments and impact assessments on the ground and evaluating and monitoring programmes undertaken by United Nations actors;

(d) NGOs requested greater collaboration with the United Nations and Governments so that their expertise and capacities could be used to their full extent, with the objective of achieving the 2030 Agenda and, more broadly, the United Nations goals;

(e) NGOs expressed the desire for greater collaboration with the United Nations at Headquarters and at the regional and subregional levels. They proposed to establish formal contact or collaboration with United Nations bodies at Headquarters, which would facilitate mutual exchanges and greater input into policymaking. NGOs also recommended that there be a designated point of contact at the NGO Branch of the Secretariat to liaise with NGOs in consultative status;

(f) Beyond Headquarters, it was suggested that civil society outreach be strengthened and streamlined throughout the United Nations system. Civil society organizations expressed a desire for greater regional and local collaboration with the United Nations. Many such organizations consider outreach that is based within their regional and subregional areas as far more effective and meaningful. They are seeking to work more closely with United Nations country teams and agencies. They recommended that the United Nations regional and country offices recognize and engage with NGOs in consultative status, so as to create synergies among themselves and further support the implementation of major United Nations goals. Language barriers were also brought up as an issue and representatives recommended that country offices work with the NGOs in their local languages;

(g) Similarly, the formation of regional networks of NGOs in consultative status to encourage intensive and informative discussions and learning were seen as a way to foster greater collaboration between NGOs working in similar fields at the regional level and to strengthen the United Nations;

(h) NGOs were encouraged that voices from civil society were increasingly being heard at the United Nations. However, there was a view that the active engagement of NGOs with Member States and their impact on policies and decision-making were still limited. In addition, NGOs thought that the current modalities for NGO participation did not take advantage of their expertise and experience. Some NGOs were also concerned about the shrinking space allocated to NGOs at the United Nations and at the country level and the general sense of mistrust between NGOs and Member States. They expressed the need for a change in the way NGO engagement was perceived by Governments in order to establish trust, cooperation and a real partnership between them. This was considered as key for the future of multilateralism;

(i) NGOs suggested that conference rooms be open to NGOs during meetings to facilitate greater interaction with Member States, and reported that the dialogue sessions that had been set up over the years in various bodies were had been helpful in establishing a dialogue with Governments;

(j) A number of NGOs expressed frustration that their participation was limited by the rules of procedure of the Council and its subsidiary bodies, which were said to differ across the various bodies. These NGOs felt therefore that they were hindered from having meaningful engagement in many intergovernmental meetings, with their participation being relegated to side events or to making short statements at the end of meetings, when Member States were no longer present in the room. Consultative status was referred to as an empty title if NGOs were not able to consult with Member States;

(k) Organizations proposed that NGO statements be made at a more strategic time during meetings so that they could serve as inputs to outcome documents. Some NGOs recommended that their statements be interspersed with statements by Governments. It was also suggested that additional space and time for speeches, meetings, round tables and side events be set aside during United Nations events, while ensuring a fair geographical representation of NGOs that were given the floor during the sessions. It was further suggested that the Committee allow one or more NGO representatives to give a statement at its opening sessions, following the precedent set at the 2016 resumed session of the Committee;

(l) It was recommended that technology also be used to enable the closer engagement of NGOs with Council bodies, for example, through the use of recorded video contributions by NGOs that could be projected during sessions;

(m) Some NGOs asked to be included in the negotiation of resolutions and the drafting of normative documents. They called upon Member States to include NGOs with a specific expertise in their delegations during intergovernmental negotiations. Organizations said that observing the negotiations of outcome documents would enable them to be better informed. It was also suggested that NGOs be appointed as full members of the Commission on the Status of Women or the high-level political forum on sustainable development or that an NGO representative be appointed as a special representative to the Secretary-General to facilitate the contribution of NGOs in decision-making processes;

(n) NGOs welcomed the numerous calls for written contributions from the Council and suggested that more written reports and contributions be requested from NGOs. However, for those inputs to be impactful, NGOs proposed that they be

included in the summary reports of the meetings. Some suggested that NGOs be divided into subcategories according to their area of work and be requested to provide expertise on specific matters. It was suggested that the questionnaire include questions concerning the priorities and strengths of NGOs in identifying, implementing or monitoring each of the Sustainable Development Goals;

(o) Some NGOs asked to play more of a leadership role, including the participation of civil society members in panels and discussions and in consultations on specific issues. NGOs could also be involved in setting up meetings and preparing agendas for events or submitting ideas for conferences. Mention was made of paragraph 28 of resolution 1996/31, which stipulated that organizations in general consultative status might propose to the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations that the Committee request the Secretary-General to place items of special interest to the organizations in the provisional agenda of the Council. In that regard, the Committee was invited to consider ways in which this clause could be applied to the annual session of the Council and to the sessions of the functional and regional commissions of the Council;

(p) The view was expressed that some consultation models could be replicated in the Council and its subsidiary bodies. The high-level political forum on sustainable development was mentioned for its focus on regional coordination mechanisms that facilitate entry points to the regional level of the United Nations and help NGOs to have more input in policy development, implementation and follow-up. The forum was also described as providing numerous ways for NGOs to participate, namely by giving access to documentation and by allowing NGOs to intervene, submit documents, make recommendations and organize events. This was referred to as an example that could be built upon and replicated in the subsidiary bodies of the Council;

(q) The tripartite model used by the International Labour Organization, whereby Governments, workers and employers are all delegates during the conferences and meetings, was referred to as a way to give equal weight to all stakeholders in the decision-making processes. Similarly, it was suggested that in the Council and its subsidiary bodies, all groups be included in discussions with Member States;

(r) NGOs underlined that the United Nations needed diverse voices from civil society organizations to bring their human rights analysis to the system and encouraged a "fit for purpose" approach to bring this about. The question was put forth as to why NGOs could not participate in the sessions of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, although they were the ones that had the information about the human rights situation on the ground;

(s) To further improve the participation of NGOs in the Human Rights Council, organizations suggested that NGO participation be encouraged during its sessions. It was also proposed that NGOs not be limited in their speaking time during its sessions and that restrictions on the number of accreditations allowed for its sessions be lifted. NGOs requested access to documents, including reports, studies, shadow reports and the zero drafts of resolutions. They recommended that making appointments with special rapporteurs be facilitated and that more time be allocated for interactive dialogue with rapporteurs. They also requested that contact with staff of the NGO Liaison Unit be facilitated to accommodate urgent requests. Finally, it was requested that transportation be made available to NGOs when conducting human rights missions in developing countries.

8. Question 2: In your organization's view, what should be done to provide better support to NGOs during the process of obtaining consultative status with the Council?

(a) Many NGOs were satisfied with the existing application process and recommended that NGOs applying for consultative status answer the questionnaire in a clear and full manner and observe the rules of the United Nations. Some suggested that the application process be simplified, in particular with regard to the questionnaire and the required supporting documents that could be challenging to obtain in some remote areas in developing countries or in countries where NGOs faced difficulties in conducting their work. Some NGOs mentioned that the time required to go through the whole process of acquiring consultative status could act as a deterrent to some NGOs and should be shortened. The current application process and its requirements were said to constitute a challenge for NGOs with limited access to the Internet or translation services;

(b) To improve the application process, organizations suggested that the application web page include the most common questions and answers about the application process and that NGOs be provided with support to translate the required supporting documents or that they be allowed to submit their application in any United Nations official language. It was proposed that regional or subregional United Nations offices relay information on the process of applying for consultative status and offer capacity-building support to NGOs in this regard. A regional United Nations representative could be available online and/or by phone to assist applicants with any questions that they might have. NGOs also suggested that they be provided with a space at subregional United Nations offices where they could have access to a reliable Internet connection to fill out and submit their application;

(c) NGOs suggested that regular webinars or online videos provide applicants with information on: (a) the United Nations and the Economic and Social Council, the main goals and objectives of the Council and the benefits of acquiring consultative status, and (b) the steps, expectations and modalities involved in obtaining consultative status. It was advised that webinars be made available in all official languages as this would allow more NGOs in developing countries to apply. NGOs also suggested having regular online and face-to-face question-and-answer sessions or having a designated point of contact within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs who would assist NGOs throughout the process and be available to answer questions on the phone;

(d) Connecting applicant NGOs with NGOs that had already acquired consultative status was seen as an effective way to support new applicants, as the latter could respond to questions and manage the expectations of the former. This could be done by pairing NGOs or by creating an online platform where NGOs in consultative status could guide applicant NGOs throughout the application process. Those interactions could also be done at the country level, facilitated by the United Nations country offices;

(e) There was a view that modalities around current accreditation processes lacked transparency, objectivity and efficiency. According to some, the Committee used procedural tactics, including repetitive questioning, to delay applications, disproportionately affecting NGOs that worked on specific human rights concerns such as sexual reproductive health rights. Some actions of the members of the Committee were said to have amounted to reprisals against NGOs seeking to cooperate with the United Nations. NGOs suggested that all allegations against NGOs be supported by evidence and shared with the concerned organizations in sufficient time to allow them a reasonable opportunity to respond;

(f) An NGO expressed concern that many NGOs financed by Governments were turned into political instruments and lost their independence. It was suggested that the trend not be allowed to prevail;

(g) A number of NGOs believed that the Committee should have safeguards to prevent against inconsistent or arbitrary delays in or denials of accreditation. They mentioned that clear guidelines were required that would explain the grounds on which applications were assessed. This would help both the Committee members in their review process and the NGOs in their understanding of how applications were assessed. Such guidelines should be prepared with input from civil society, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and relevant special procedures. Suggestions were also made to limit the number of questions asked or to limit the number of sessions during which applications could be reviewed, after which decisions on whether to grant accreditation or not should be taken by the Council. There were views that the Council should consider establishing term limits for membership in the Committee or increase the number of Member States on the Committee;

(h) The time frame within which the answers of NGOs were considered by the Committee was seen by a number of participants as problematic as it further delayed the accreditation. Some NGO representatives suggested that NGOs be given the option to respond to questions immediately, including by using videoconferencing facilities. NGO applicants should also be able to participate in the daily question-and-answer session through the use of videoconferencing. Member States of the Committee should ensure that NGOs always had the opportunity to respond to any objection to their obtaining of consultative status, as required in paragraph 15 of resolution 1996/31, and to respond to any intention to suspend or withdraw status under part VII of the resolution, as required in paragraph 56 of the resolution.

9. Question 3: How can the participation of NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition in the work of the United Nations be increased?

(a) Although the proportion of NGOs with consultative status developing countries and countries with economies in transition has increased in recent years, NGOs from developed countries are still much more represented than NGOs from other parts of the world. To remedy this imbalance, NGOs suggested that NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition be made aware of the consultative status and its benefits, as they were often not informed of it, especially those located in rural and remote areas. Indigenous peoples' organizations should also be targeted in this context. The information should be publicized widely and decentralized, including through the press and through local events organized by United Nations representatives in country offices or through relevant embassies. Informational webinars could be targeted towards NGOs in remote areas or populations that were the least represented in the Council. NGOs that had obtained consultative status could also help to conduct outreach or mentorship activities in their region or country;

(b) It was agreed that NGOs from developing countries and countries with economies in transition were also at a disadvantage when it came to participating in United Nations meetings once they had acquired consultative status. The concern most mentioned was the lack of funding that prevented those NGOs from attending meetings in person;

(c) To address that problem, NGOs recommended increasing access to grants or funding for obtaining visas and covering the travel and lodging costs for NGO representatives that had limited financial resources. Waiving fees to hold events at the United Nations for NGOs from low-income countries or establishing dedicated lodgings in New York, Geneva and Vienna for NGO representatives were also suggested. NGOs also recommended enhancing remote participation in meetings through webcasts, videoconferences and online meeting rooms and by allowing the submission of written inputs;

(d) Some NGOs mentioned the possible creation of a fund within the Council backed by foundations, Member States, large NGOs and the private sector to financially support organizations in need. Organizations could be selected to receive funding based on certain criteria for participating in United Nations meetings. Furthermore, some NGOs asked to be informed of outside networks, such as businesses, foundations and other organizations, that offered grants to NGOs for participating in meetings;

(e) Many NGOs were also concerned by the difficulties in obtaining visas, including delays, costs and denials, that prevented the participation of civil society representatives in the meetings of the Council and its subsidiary bodies. They considered that the Council should take up instances of denials of visas for civil society representatives with relevant State authorities. Some representatives also suggested that copies of the official letters of invitation be sent to the relevant embassies to facilitate the process of obtaining visas;

(f) It was also recommended that NGO coalitions or federations be allowed to register their member organizations for meetings to overcome the challenge faced by NGOs with limited access to the Internet;

(g) It was further recommended that Member States take into account the fact that NGOs with financial resources or organizations based in New York did not represent all NGOs in consultative status. The United Nations should encourage and seek formulas and, if necessary, financial solutions, to increase the presence of NGOs from developing countries;

(h) Although regional consultations provided additional avenues for civil society organizations to participate in the lead-up to major United Nations events, NGOs believed that the United Nations, including the Commission on the Status of Women and other functional commissions, should endeavour to hold more major meetings in locations outside of North America and Europe. Some NGOs suggested establishing a venue rotation for meetings of the Council;

(i) NGOs also proposed that the Council ensure that alliances and networks of civil society organizations with strong constituencies in the South were prioritized for cooperation with the United Nations, since those organizations could provide avenues for smaller grass-roots NGOs to participate.

10. Question 4: Once consultative status is granted to organizations, what are the best ways for NGOs to access the opportunities given to them to take part in United Nations processes?

(a) NGOs requested that more information be communicated to them after having acquired consultative status so that they could make better use of their status. Some suggested that providing information by means of a welcome package or an in-person orientation session would be useful;

(b) Regular training modules, either online or in person, were requested to inform NGOs about the United Nations system and the various processes and meetings that they could take part in. Some training modules could be specifically targeted to certain NGOs working in a particular field. For example, trainings on the Human Rights Council could be provided to organizations focused on human rights. Orientation sessions could even be organized by NGOs that had been working with the United Nations for a long time in order to share their experience and expertise. It was also suggested that all NGOs in consultative status take the various courses offered by the United Nations Institute for Training and Research to become familiarized with the United Nations system;

(c) NGOs also requested that they be provided with more information about upcoming United Nations meetings and conferences, with sufficient time provided to plan attendance and obtain visas. With that in mind, the United Nations could build a single, centralized agenda of all the United Nations meetings and conferences that NGOs could attend. This could be updated and sent to all NGOs in consultative status every year. Monthly newsletters with information about upcoming meetings, as well as decisions and reports that were adopted, should also be shared, according to organizations. It was recommended that there be a single, centralized web page, where all the meetings and events of the Council and its subsidiary bodies could be listed. Representatives also recommended that the Council publicize meetings on social media and encourage NGOs to subscribe to the Journal of the United Nations, to the newsletter of the NGO Branch and to other newsletters;

(d) Several NGOs proposed that a yearly conference or town hall meeting be held for all NGOs in consultative status, during which NGOs could learn about the priorities of the Council and its subsidiary bodies and the meetings being held. Some NGOs also welcomed the possibility of sharing information on their best practices, case studies and experience. A yearly conference was seen as an opportunity for some to submit their contributions to the work of the United Nations and the Council;

(e) NGOs asked for more networking opportunities among themselves, including through an online platform or database where NGOs could be grouped according to their industry and field of work. This would also provide a forum for the sharing of best practices and information and the broadcasting of the work and services that organizations had to offer. It was suggested that the Council organize a welcoming event for NGOs that had just acquired consultative status to foster networking and a greater sense of unity among NGOs and with the United Nations;

(f) NGOs recommended that the Council ask NGOs that had extensive experience working at the United Nations to take recently accredited NGOs under their wing so that they could become familiar with the United Nations system and learn how to build relationships with Member States. Some NGOs also suggested that there be a specific room at Headquarters allocated for NGOs to meet and collaborate.

Other interventions and concluding remarks

11. The representative of the United States of America expressed immense pleasure to see these consultations being held. She said that the international community should work to create an enabling environment for civil society to contribute to the United Nations, as its participation enabled the Organization to better perform its work. She reiterated that these consultations should be held before each session of the Committee and during the intersessional period as well. Finally, she encouraged Committee members to consider the recommendations made by NGOs.

12. The Chair concluded the consultations by saying that the wealth of recommendations that had emerged reaffirmed the importance of continuing the dialogue and partnership between the United Nations and NGOs. He stated that these consultations marked an important step towards further strengthening that partnership. He said that the contributions from NGOs remained more than ever essential to the effective implementation of the United Nations agenda in many fields and he counted on them to continue their active mobilization in support of the commitments made by Member States under the 2030 Agenda.